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British Get Edge From U.S. Electronics, Pentagon Says

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WASHINGTON—Sophisticated electronic gear provided by the United States has been a major reason that Britain has gained a clear advantage so far in its Falkland Islands confrontation with Argentina, U.S. defense analysts said Monday.

"It almost makes it an unfair fight," a Pentagon official said, describing the network of eavesdropping and surveillance assistance that has enabled British naval commanders to receive copies of orders transmitted to the Argentine fleet almost as soon as Argentina's Defense Ministry issues them.

The Pentagon has also provided mobile satellite communications devices to the Royal Marines unit that would go ashore in advance of any British assault on the Falkland Islands, occupied since April 2 by Argentina.

That equipment, which would give the landing team instant communications with London, would enable British military and political officials to receive immediate first-hand assessments of Argentine defenses of the islands and to give final approval for a full-scale assault.

The equipment is so new, the officials said, that "nobody else in the world has the stuff."

U.S. defense analysts, however, do not expect the British to launch a direct assault on the Falklands soon. One reason is that the main body of marines who would make up the assault force remains on Ascension Island, about two weeks travel and deployment time away.

Thus, the officials expect Britain to maintain its tight 200-mile "war zone" around the Falklands, with occasional air strikes against the islands' airfields, naval shelling of

Argentine facilities on the islands and interdiction of Argentine warships. In that effort to demolish Argentine morale and to push Argentina toward a settlement, the surveillance and eavesdropping assistance given by the United States provides Britain with "an indisputable edge," the U.S. officials said Monday.

Since Britain declared the war zone around the Falklands, its forces have sunk the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano and a patrol boat and have damaged another patrol boat.

Argentine officials conceded Monday that the 13,000-ton General Belgrano, torpedoed by a British submarine Sunday, had sunk. The officials said rescue efforts have been hampered by poor weather and because the disabled ship had been maintaining radio silence for security reasons.

U.S. officials declined to say exactly how the United States is collecting naval intelligence and passing it on to the British. Officials have said the United States collects photographic intelligence from two satellites, but they conceded that such reconnaissance is useless in cloudy weather.

The officials insisted, however, that "there is almost nothing that is said in Argentina that we don't know about."

The Soviet Union has at least six satellites that pass over Argentina. The satellites, according to defense sources here, have both electronic-eavesdropping and radar-sensing capabilities. Administration officials have suggested that the Soviet Union is passing information collected by its satellites to Argentina, but they said they have no proof of their suspicions.

Further U.S. aid to Britain in the Falklands crisis was discussed Sunday as British Foreign Secretary Francis Pym met with Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. While no details of U.S. offers were reported publicly, Haig said the British would be given unspecified "material support."

U.S. military analysts said the British appear to need little additional support at this point, except supplemental heavy air transport.

At present, according to Administration officials, Britain is using an aging fleet of C-130 military transports to run a continual airlift of food, spare parts and fuel from England to Ascension Island, Britain's mid-Atlantic staging point. En route, the aircraft must refuel in Dakar, Senegal, on the West African coast.

One possibility is for the United States to provide Britain with C-5 aircraft, the largest military transports in the world, to supplement the C-130s, which the British are "working the daylight out of," according to Administration officials.

WEINBERGER...Continued

ture of a President who insists he cannot bargain with the Soviets until he can look across at them from an arsenal of weapons equal to what he thinks theirs is.

Senators are a class generally immune to the President's disease of intellectual integrity; and the most significant note in yesterday's proceedings was the alarm so many of the Republicans displayed at the hazard to themselves implicit in any call to stand by their President against the public.

Sen. Larry Pressler of South Dakota told Weinberger that "some of the most conservative people in my state" are beseeching him to vote for cuts in the defense budget. Sen. Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas spoke of the "mad arms race" and Weinberger hastened to reply that "it is not a mad race" but only an exercise of our sane purpose "of regaining strength."

"We can't depend on the old cliché that

each side could blow up the other," he observed at one point in his beleaguement. Whatever relief the poor Republicans might have felt at learning that there existed at least one ancient saw that the administration does not swear by had to be overborne by the suspicion, fortified by the latest polls, that this happens to be a cliché in which a large proportion of the public profoundly believes.

The contagious effect of public opinion even upon the Republicans was plainest in the absence of a visible Weinberger ally on the Republican side of the table. Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina is generally accounted the conservative contingent's hardest rock; and yet, when his time came, he spent it hectoring the Defense Department "for dragging your heels" on development of the laser beams and satellite rifles that can shoot down Soviet missiles at a cost of approximately a dime a dozen.

Weinberger replied that this sovereign remedy could not be a practical

ality before the year 2000 and in the interim, we would have to make do with substitutes. Jesse Helms went grumbling away; and the secretary had cause to reflect that, when the water rises to your gunwales, you can count on Jesse Helms to go over the side early.

After awhile, Weinberger was released to his cosmic responsibilities, in this case lunch with the Tunisian ambassador. The window of vulnerability yawned as large as before behind him.

They have come that far down from the clouds in little more than a year. Poor President Reagan. In the '40s, when President Harry Truman set himself to arm against the Soviets, Sen. Arthur Vandenberg advised him that he could only get his program through by scaring hell out of the country.

This administration has tried the same thing and and seems to have succeeded. The trouble is that it has come too close to being itself what scares the country.